

Speech for Yom Hashoah 27 January 2010 by Ambassador Benny Dagan

"Remember the past for the sake of the future and may the past of the old not become the future of the young" (Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Prof. Eli Wiesel)

Survivors, Ministers, former Prime Minister, former Ministers, Mp's, Excellencies, Dear friends and guests,

Let me acknowledge, this evening, in this International Day of Holocaust Commemoration, initiated by Israel and adopted by the GA of the UN in 2005, the presence of Mr. Dan Tichon former speaker of the Knesset and of Mrs. Aviva Raz-Shechter, Director of the Department for Combating Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Remembrance in the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

The special guests from Israel participated yesterday in the seminar "Ten years with the Stockholm declaration" organized by the Living History Forum under the auspices of the Swedish Foreign Ministry and with the participation of the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Norway. FM Bildt said, among other things: "Such conditions (that led to atrocities) are ultimately set by the Political leadership and also to a certain extent by the media...it is our rhetoric, our arguments...which shape the moral content of society".

As you know, the Stockholm declaration was adopted by 50 participating states attending the Stockholm International Forum Conference on the Holocaust, in 2000.

This year the State of Israel assumes the chairmanship of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF) which the Stockholm Declaration serves as its basic document. I can assure you that Israel will demonstrate vigorous and robust leadership in the chairmanship of this important organization that was founded in May 1998 as a result of an initiative of the former Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson.

The famous Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk revealed recently that his renowned book the "last Jew" was inspired by the real story of Gilbert, one of four survivors lived in his street in Jaffa, Israel. I was sitting with him for days, weeks, months recalled Kaniuk, he was a Jew who had survived Auschwitz and he told me how he was sitting in a small room, carving amazingly beautiful wooden toys.

The Nazis wanted these toys for their children on holidays; they were after all good parents, so they kept Gilbert alive. When the war ended he was sure that he was really the last Jew.

Each and every one of you here could have been the last Jew if the Nazis had their way. In January 1942 the Nazis decided that not less than 11 million Jews would be murdered in the "final solution" including in neutral countries like Switzerland and Sweden as documented in the book: The villa, the lake, the meeting: Wannsee and the final solution, London 2002.

That was the only strategic decision among 10 fateful choices that changed the world between 1940 and 1941, decisions like declaring war on the US, or initiating the Barbarossa operation against Russia. This was the only one that was presented to the decision makers without any alternatives for discussion. The only thing that was discussed was how to execute this satanic plan that in the eyes of the Nazis was a logical conclusion of their worldview and part and parcel of the war goals.

So, even here in neutral Sweden there was no real guarantee for the well being of Jews, had the Nazis succeeded in their designs.

Here in Sweden, The Living History Forum, the Swedish governmental authority with its dedicated staff under the leadership of Dr. Eskil Franck, the Ministry of Culture under the leadership of Minister Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth and the Swedish government as a whole deserve today much appreciation and admiration. Their continuous work to promote understanding of the Shoah and its consequences thru the educational programs of Living History has not gone unnoticed in Israel and elsewhere

I read with much interest and gratification the new chapter in the famous book "Tell Ye Your Children" that courageously examines the events in Sweden during the fateful period 1933-1945. The authors of this new chapter do not depict a rosy picture of neutral Sweden, but rather document the realities of the time with its dark long shadows and with its heroism of rescuing tenth of thousands of Jews . No more secrets hidden in the closet.

Yes, segments of the Swedish society sympathized with Nazi Germany, that was defiantly the approach of several newspapers, among them what is defined in the book as "the pro Nazi Aftonbladet". The book presents a copy of an article from 14 August 1941 by Aftonbladet's Fritz Lönngren, who had received special permission by the Germans to follow their advancing troops. The article showed understanding for the atrocities perpetrated by the local population against the Jews during the German onslaught.

The new chapter deals openly with the issue of trade between Sweden and Germany during the war and describes the increasing pressure from the U.S. and UK on Sweden to shut off supplies of raw materials and products of significant value for the German war effort.

However, the trade continued long after the Nazi mass murder of Jews was widely known and talked about in the press and long after the turning point towards the defeat of the Nazis. The new chapter mentions boldly that some historians believe that the Swedish trade with Germany prolonged the war, and thus the Holocaust.

By looking inwards, with this daring endeavor of soul searching, Sweden fulfilled yet another commitment under the Stockholm Declaration, namely the principle that demands all member governments to examine their own past history regarding actions or inaction during the Holocaust.

The Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism is another organization of high quality that Sweden should be proud of with its dedicated and talented staff, operating until recently under the leadership of Prof. Jesper Svartvik and now under the leadership of Willy Silberstein. In its meticulous, cautious and professional way of seeking the truth, the committee and other quality voices in the Swedish society and press have revealed and dealt with unfortunate affairs. I will mention only two of them:

The first was the flirting of a Swedish party leader with anti-Semitic materials on the Web, bringing up again the daunting question: how is it that even among parts of the left, not just the right, there are sometimes inclinations to cross the line between criticizing Israel and manifestations of Anti-Semitism. This was evident in the case of the military expert of HRW who wrote highly critical reports against Israel while collecting Nazi memorabilia and participating in pro Nazi websites. Needless to say that after some unfortunate hesitations he was fired by his organization.

The second affair was the shameful outright modern blood libel produced by the best selling newspaper in Sweden, Aftonbladet. A blood libel that has been incorporated now into this vast, ugly campaign in parts of the Arab and the Muslim world to demonize, delegitimize Israel and poison attempts to reconcile with it.

In light of this campaign of hatred I would just add, as stipulated in the Stockholm Declaration, that governments do have a political commitment and role when it comes to the public sphere and especially when there is a noticeable rise of Anti-Semitic incidents, as was the case in 2009 all over Europe.

The Declaration states that "We must strengthen the moral commitment of our peoples and the political commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences".

Laws and constitutions as they are construed by the appropriate national legal authorities in charge do provide the needed leeway for respective governments to respond. Even in delicate situations when freedom of expression and freedom of the press are seemingly involved, governments can and should voice carefully, yet clearly their reservations in regard to objectionable contents.

Is it merely a legal issue or foremost a question of civil and political valour in the face of growing tendencies to deliberately confuse between criticizing Israel and using symbols and images associated with classic Anti-Semitism?

Is it really an issue for political clash between opposition and government, or an opportunity for opposing political forces to come together in the spirit of the Stockholm Declaration?

We are increasingly concerned with the comprehensive challenge posed by Iran in regard to denial of the Holocaust; state sponsored Anti-Semitism and repeated calls to bring about the destruction of Israel.

Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, President Ahmadinejad's source of religious authority and spiritual mentor asserted earlier this month, on January 5th that the centers of corruption in the world belonged to the Jews and the Zionists and that they endeavored to corrupt the rest of the people in the world so that they ultimately rule the world. He went on to say that the Jews are the most corrupt race.

The leadership of Iran that has lost the legitimacy of its own people and has been transformed into a brutal military dictatorship has not encountered yet a resolute and determined international community. Yes, Iran is not Nazi Germany and Israel is not a powerless state, but the lack of a proper collective response and leadership by the EU is not a reassuring recipe for world peace. Time and again under EU presidencies, including the most recent one, Europe is divided, can't even work in harmony when it comes to simple symbolic gestures like not attending UNGA session when Ahmadinejad takes the podium and once again talks the Anti Semitic talk of the Zionist/Jewish control of world institutions. Yes, statements of condemnations are issued but actions are still weak and we are running out of time.

Let me conclude by saying that Israel, thru relatively new international instruments under its leadership like The Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism and the Inter-Parliamentary Coalition for Combating Anti-Semitism that was convened for the first time in 2009 in London under the auspices of the British Parliament, has put the emphasis on old and new forms of Anti-Semitism, trends in the demonization and delegitimization of Israel in the International arena, Anti-Semitism in the Arab and Muslim World, the state of Anti-Semitism around the world and historical revisionism and Holocaust denial.

History has shown us that if these issues are not dealt with seriously, effectively, collectively then all democracies pay a very heavy price even if at the end of the day they are victorious.

